

# T<sup>3</sup>: Trustee Training Tips

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[Kentucky Department for Libraries & Archives](#)

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## MAKING NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

**H**ave you ever thought about making New Year's resolutions in your role as public library trustee? As with personal resolutions, striving to improve oneself is noble, but goals need to be realistic if they are going to have half a chance of being met. Here are a few that meet the realistic test and should help improve trustee performance.

Resolve to visit at least two other library board meetings during 2003. It is up to you to decide if these boards should be very like your own library in size or income—or very different. Pay attention to how they conduct business. Are they doing something your board should be doing? Are you witnessing a less efficient meeting than your own? Can you identify why? (Note: transportation need not be an obstacle; ask your regional librarian about riding with her/him to the meeting if you are visiting another library in your own region. It will also give you an opportunity to discuss what you hope to learn on the way there and what you did learn from the experience on the return trip.)

Resolve to attend at least one training event for library trustees in 2003. Several options are available, including the annual Kentucky Library Trustee Association (KLTA) conference, set for May 8-9 at the Galt House Hotel in Louisville. July is the traditional month for the annual Trustee Institute; a 90-minute continuing education activity following dinner at a State Park near you. For those with bigger library budgets, the American Library Association's annual conference is scheduled for June 19-25 in Toronto, Ontario. Attending a conference, be it in a nearby park or a distant city, is a legitimate library expense and all expenses (travel, registration, lodging, meals, etc) should be reimbursed to trustees who attend. In addition, most regional librarians sponsor a trustee workshop annually, usually as a 1 ½ to 2-hour session following dinner.

Resolve to read at least three articles about library trends and/or trustee issues in professional journals. Don't know about these journals? Then ask your library director to show you what is available at your library or through interlibrary loan. Pick your own articles rather than relying on your director so you will select something that matches your interests or piques your curiosity. Share what you've learned with the other trustees on your board and encourage them to do likewise. Don't be embarrassed if you misunderstood something, but look upon it as an opportunity for clarification and discussion, a chance to make yourself a better trustee.

## SINS OF SILENCE

Frequently, the most damaging action board members can make is failing to speak up regarding their opinions on a particular matter. These “sins of silence” on the part of trustees usually occur because they incorrectly assume that there is a logic to the discussion or action being undertaken that they simply do not understand, but others do. Here are the four most common “silencing” statements board members make to themselves that can harm any library:

1. *“It’s not my area of expertise, so I won’t say anything.”*

All too often, trustees overlook the fact that they can, and should, be participating in discussions outside of their area of expertise because, as a non-expert, they ask obvious questions—the kind that “experts” often overlook!

2. *“I’m new, so I shouldn’t interrupt the discussion with a question everyone else knows the answer to. When I’ve been here longer, I’ll understand why this is being done.”*

Remember...one of the greatest values of new board members is their newness and that value disappears if they remain silent when decisions are being made that make no sense to them.

3. *“Everyone else seems to think this is a good idea, so why voice my objection?”*

The consensus style of much board decision making can be dangerous if it results in a board culture where disagreement is discouraged—or even taboo. Yet many boards, even those with high level executives from business, political, and other walks of life, often fall into this trap!

4. *“Everyone says the board debates this issue perennially with no resolution. There’s no point in adding my thoughts if they have discussed it so thoroughly before.”*

The previous fruitless discussions are exactly why a new board member should chime in on any discussion of a board issue that seems to surface repeatedly and never goes anywhere. The best question the new trustee can ask in this situation is usually, “What problem are we trying to solve by doing this?” Remember...board members who have served on a board for several years provide an important institutional memory and depth to any consideration. However, their contribution is only different, but surely not more significant, than the contribution of new board members.

## TRUSTEE SNAPSHOT

According to a study done in 1998 by the American Library Association, public library trustees today are very similar to those in 1935. A few characteristics are:

- 65% are female
- 96% are white
- 74% are appointed
- a majority are over 50 years in age, while the majority of the general population is under 50
- Most are college graduates, with a significant number holding graduate or professional degrees; not so for the general population.

## IS IT A MEETING OR NOT?

Sometimes, especially during winter when bad weather and early darkness pose problems, a library board is faced with not having a quorum. Does the board hold the meeting anyway? Do they reschedule for later in the month and hope nothing interferes this time? How does this count toward absences for individual trustees? What can a board do in a meeting without a quorum?

These are worthwhile questions, as they frame an issue any board may face at any time. But before answering them let's look at some background information. According to the Kentucky Revised Statutes, "a majority of the board shall constitute a quorum." For five-member boards—which make up most library boards—this means three would make a quorum. The statutes concerning the Open Meetings Act remind us that all meetings, in which business is conducted, are made up of a quorum of the members. Finally, boards are required "to meet on a regularly scheduled basis once each month."

To address this set of circumstances, it might prove easier to look at them in a hypothetical scenario. Anytown Public Library has its regularly scheduled monthly meetings the fourth Monday of each month at 5:00 PM. On December 23<sup>rd</sup>, a much-anticipated snowfall begins shortly after 3:00 PM. Trustee A had announced at the November meeting that she would not be attending the December meeting. Trustee B, who never likes to drive after dark or in bad weather, calls the library at 3:30 PM to say he won't be there after all. Minutes before 5:00, Trustees C and D arrive, anxious for a short meeting. No one has heard from Trustee E, but after waiting 15 minutes, all assume he is not coming either. What should they do?

Here are their options: (1) They can go ahead and have their December meeting, but Trustees A, B, and E will be recorded as absent. This may affect their continuance as board members—a factor that may influence the decision. If the meeting is held, it is important to remember that no actions may be taken. The board (all two of them) can discuss issues, but no votes can be made until a quorum is present. The board then needs to determine if whatever is on the agenda can reasonably be held until their January meeting—and most routine business such as approving minutes and financial reports generally can be. If so, then continuing with the meeting is a viable option.

Option (2) is to reschedule the meeting for another time in December. This involves conducting such a meeting under the very precise rules of a "special called meeting." More importantly for a board like Anytown's, there may not be time left in the month to reschedule.

It may prove too inflexible to adopt a set policy to deal with meetings without quorums. Treating each on a case-by-case basis allows the board to react to each episode more efficiently.

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## **LIBRARY LETTERS**

*Dear Marian Librarian,  
Sometimes our board goes into a closed session  
and the Secretary insists on taking minutes of  
these sessions. Is she really supposed to do so?*

*-- Troubled Trustee*

Dear Troubled,

Let's look at the purpose of minutes: to record the business the library board conducts at each meeting. As no action may be taken during a closed session, there is no business being conducted. If you are conducting your closed sessions as required by the Open Meeting Act exceptions (KRS 61.810), then all you will be doing is discussing those issues you are allowed to discuss privately. To take any action on them, the board must come out of the closed session and entertain motions, seconds, and vote in open session. As minutes usually reflect only motions, seconds, and votes, it is not necessary (nor advisable) to keep minutes.

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## **HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW?**

The following quiz will let you test your knowledge on the topics covered in this publication. The answers are under "Publications" on KDLA's web page [www.kdla.net](http://www.kdla.net)

1. How might a trustee go about finding appropriate articles to read about library issues or trusteeship?
2. Shouldn't a new trustee hold back for at least 6 months before voicing an opinion so he'll know more about his library's issues?
3. What can a board do in a meeting without a quorum?
4. Why might a board decide to reschedule a regular monthly meeting?
5. Shouldn't a board keep minutes of every part of its meeting—even the occasional closed sessions? Are those minutes part of Open Records?

**ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED**  
**PLEASE FORWARD**

## **ANSWERS TO T<sup>3</sup> QUIZ:**

1. **How might a trustee go about finding appropriate articles to read about library issues or trusteeship?** [page 1]

*First of all, visit your library director at work and ask which professional journals she subscribes to. Then discuss each, asking her opinion as to which ones will have articles geared to trustees or which traditionally have articles you might find interesting. Then ask to borrow a few. If nothing captures your fancy, ask what other professional journals might be available for interlibrary loan. And, if you've made that resolution to visit other library board meetings, this would be a good time to see what that library has and preview some articles. Don't forget to ask your regional librarian as yet another source. When you go to workshops/conferences for trustees, ask your fellow board members what they read to stay on top of things. What you want to avoid is having your reading "spoon fed" to you by someone else—learn to choose for yourself and broaden your horizons.*

2. **Shouldn't a new trustee hold back for at least 6 months before voicing an opinion so he'll know more about his library's issues?** [page 2]

*No. Exactly the opposite is true. Remember the saying, "out of the mouths of babes...?" Just consider yourself a babe in libraryland and ask all the questions you need to ask. Chances are some of the more "seasoned" trustees have the same questions but are too embarrassed to ask. Not only are you likely to bring more detailed discussion to the table, you may never know how appreciative some of your colleagues may be. You cannot vote competently if you don't know the facts. To paraphrase the famous real estate mantra: Ask, Ask, Ask.*

3. **What can a board do in a meeting without a quorum??** [page 3]

*Not much, but then maybe not much needs to be done at that specific time. You can discuss issues for as long as you wish; you cannot make decisions about them. You can hear reports; you cannot make decisions about them. You can determine that everything on your agenda can be held until the next month's meeting, count those not there as absent, and go home. You can determine that it is necessary to act on one or more agenda items before the next meeting and reschedule the current month's meeting. If you do reschedule, remember to follow the rules of a "special called meeting."*

4. **Why might a board decide to reschedule a regular monthly meeting?** [page 3]

*There are two major reasons a board might decide to reschedule a regular monthly meeting at which no quorum was present. **Number One** is that there are agenda items that really do need to be dealt with before the next month's meeting. Contracts for automation or building repairs come to mind as an example. Perhaps a delicate personnel issue needs a decision immediately or a deadline must be met. **Number Two** is that a specific board member will cross the absence threshold and be off the board if she misses this meeting. Of course, that may not always be a bad idea, but it is definitely one to be taken into consideration.*

5. **Shouldn't a board keep minutes of every part of its meeting—even the occasional closed sessions? Are those minutes part of Open Records?** [page 4]

*There is no regulation or law stating the answer; it is left to common sense. An Opinion of the Attorney General (OAG 81-387) addressing this issue says, "minutes...are not required to show any more than the formal action taken and the votes cast by the members. It is not required to summarize the discussion or record what any of the members said." Since no action may be taken in a closed session, but must be done in open meetings, it becomes a moot point. Still, if a board insists upon having minutes of the discussions done in a closed session, such minutes are not subject to Open Records Act provisions. But why would you want them?*